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# U.S. Officials Try to Assess Gorbachev Role

## Coming Events May Give Clue to Soviet Leader's Consolidation of Power

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WASHINGTON—Reagan administration officials, wary of being swept away by what one calls the "gushing" over Mikhail Gorbachev, are outlining some practical tests for measuring the performance of the new Soviet leader at home.

The Gorbachev tests assume that the 54-year-old Soviet official will try to consolidate power swiftly and decisively now that he has won the post of general secretary of the Communist Party. Any prolonged delay in this process, U.S. officials believe, will signal that the Soviet leader has encountered political obstacles that are forcing him to share power or to move more cautiously.

U.S. officials emphasize that their assessment of the hurdles that lie ahead for Mr. Gorbachev doesn't diminish President Reagan's desire for improved U.S.-Soviet relations or the American expectation that Mr. Gorbachev will prove a far stronger leader domestically and internationally than his late predecessor, Konstantin Chernenko.

### U.S. Hopes for Summit

Secretary of State George Shultz reiterated yesterday on ABC-TV's "This Week with David Brinkley" that the administration hopes for an early Reagan-Gorbachev summit meeting, saying it would be "useful to review the bidding" in U.S.-Soviet relations. But Mr. Shultz cautioned that recent Soviet statements about the Geneva arms talks don't "bode very well" for negotiations and that Moscow's plan to deploy a new mobile missile "raises very considerable questions" about Soviet compliance with the SALT II agreement.

The U.S. analysis of Mr. Gorbachev's domestic political situation, like much of American Kremlinology, is based partly on rumor and guesswork, rather than on hard fact. But it does provide a yardstick for assessing the Soviet leader's performance during his early months in power.

Reagan administration officials believe that before Mr. Gorbachev launches any broad internal changes, he must assemble a leadership team that can carry out his policies. The officials say they will be assessing Mr. Gorbachev's performance against an informal timetable for this housecleaning.

### Events to Watch

The key events:

—A plenum of the party's Central Committee. There are rumors in Moscow that such a meeting may be held next month to discuss the issues of science and technology that Mr. Gorbachev has championed. A plenum would give the new leader a chance to show his political muscle, perhaps by distributing a draft of the new party program he helped write. If this meeting is delayed, it could be an early sign of trouble for Mr. Gorbachev.

—New appointments to the ruling Politburo. At the end of Central Committee plenums, the Soviets often announce top-level leadership changes. So there could be a move next month to expand the Politburo, which currently has 10 members, by adding some Gorbachev supporters.

Since the normal membership of the body in recent years has been 12 to 15, Mr. Gorbachev has an unusually large number of slots available. Likely candidates for promotion: heavy-industry expert Vladimir Dolgikh and KGB chief Viktor Chebrikov. If the Politburo stays at 10 members, it could mean that the party's Old Guard is balking at the transfer of power.

—The Supreme Defense Council. A crucial indicator of Mr. Gorbachev's progress will be how soon he is publicly identified as chairman of this body, which makes him, in the words of one State Department official, "the man with the finger on the button."

Some U.S. analysts think that Mr. Gorbachev may already have this post, even though it hasn't been announced. They note that last month, when Politburo member Viktor Grishin identified Mr. Chernenko in a speech as chairman of the defense council, this reference was deleted from published accounts of the speech. If Mr. Gorbachev doesn't get the defense post, he has serious problems.

—A new head of state. Mr. Gorbachev's recent predecessors as general secretary also became chairmen of the Soviet parliament, known as the Supreme Soviet, which made them heads of state as well as political leaders. Given this recent tradition, it would be a loss of status for Mr. Gorbachev if he didn't pick up the additional title.

Some U.S. experts predict, however, that Mr. Gorbachev may try to reassure the Old Guard by appointing Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko as head of state. This would ratify Mr. Gromyko's informal role as the No. 2 Soviet official, and it could open the way for Mr. Gorbachev to appoint his own foreign minister. There are rumors in Moscow that the Supreme Soviet may meet in May or June; a delay could mean a dispute over power-sharing arrangements.

—Purging the party. The Soviets are scheduled to hold their regular five-year party congress in February 1986. This meeting is a milestone, as it will elect the new Central Committee and give Mr. Gorbachev a chance to weed out corrupt and incompetent party officials. U.S. experts believe that, without such changes in party personnel, Mr. Gorbachev won't make any headway in improving the Soviet economy. A delay in the party congress would signal turmoil within the party.

The likely hatchet man will be Yegor Ligachev, the Central Committee secretary responsible for party organization and, like Mr. Gorbachev, a protege of the late Soviet leader Yuri Andropov. A sign that a purge is under way would be the elevation of Mr. Ligachev next month to candidate membership of the Politburo.